

# **THE ALABAMA JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**



## **Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership**

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# The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership

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Editor  
Yvette Bynum

*The University of Alabama*

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The **Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (AAPEL)** is a non-profit professional society organized for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a collegial and collaborative organization in the State of Alabama. In addition, this organization exists for the purpose of:

1. Promoting continuous dialog among Educational Leadership Professors;
2. Exploring and promoting research, thus making distinctive contributions to the field;
3. Recognizing and examining strengths and weaknesses in Educational Leadership Programs,
4. Establishing informational and professional linkages with the State Department of Education and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education; and
5. Perpetuating a positive vision for Alabama Schools and other educational institutions

For more information, please visit us at  
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**AAPEL Call for Papers and Publication Information**  
**2018-2019**  
**Theme: Leadership Matters**

Full research papers with results are preferred, but theoretical contributions, action research, and literature reviews are considered on a limited basis per volume. Submission must include a one hundred word (100) abstract and five (5) key words. Send one electronic copy of the manuscript, using Word or a Word-compatible word-processing program. A letter signed by the author(s) authorizing permission to publish must accompany the manuscript. In addition, a separate cover page must be included containing the article title, each author's name, professional title, highest degree obtained, institutional affiliation, email address, telephone and FAX numbers. Only the article title should appear on the subsequent pages to facilitate a triple-blind reviewing of the manuscript.

Submissions should be 2,000 to 3,000 words in length (approximately 15-20 pages including references). Submissions must adhere to the criteria and standards of the *APA Manual* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition) (<http://www.apastyle.org>). Submissions must be double-spaced, upper and lower case, 12 point Times New Roman font with one inch margins on all sides, each page numbered. Submissions in different formats will be automatically rejected.

Deadline for submissions is April 1, 2019, in anticipation for a September 2019 publication date of the AAPEL Journal (AJEL) Volume 5, 2019. To submit materials for consideration, send one electronic copy of the manuscript and requested information, using Word or Word compatible word processing program to:

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## Note from the Editor

Yvette Bynum, Ph.D.  
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Welcome to Volume VI of the *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership* (AJEL). AJEL uses a peer-reviewed, triple-blind process upheld by the Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (AAPEL). AAPEL is celebrating the continued growth of AJEL with enthusiasm and is indexed with the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) at <https://eric.ed.gov/> and has acquired the ISSN 2473-8115. Volume 6 includes a variety of manuscripts stemming from a broad theme: Leadership Matters.

The first article of AJEL begins with Bentley and Samuels reviewing the collaborative and innovative programs for Teacher and Instructional leadership, while Brown discusses project-based learning in higher education programs. As you continue to read, you will learn more about leading rural schools from Mendiola, Bynum, and Westbrook. Next, Warfield, Young, and Gill discuss building professional capacity in leaders. Finally, Gage and Thomas wrap up this issue with a discussion on social and emotional learning and its effects on school climate.

As we move forward, the continuation of various manuscripts for publication consideration is requested. We encourage submissions from novice and experienced faculty as well as students. The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership is a refereed journal using a triple-blind review process. Please visit the ICPEL state affiliate website at <https://www.icpel.org/state-affiliate-journals.html> to review all volumes of AJEL.

I want to acknowledge the many people supporting the continuation of AJEL. First, thank you to all of the authors for submitting manuscripts. Also, an enormous thanks to the manuscript reviewers, AAPEL Editorial, Executive, and Advisory boards. The journal would a sucess without your support.

Finally, to Brad Bizzell with the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) Publications, AJEL would not be possible without your direction, and support. To the readers, I hope the content will provide you with a deeper awareness of the many features of Instructional Leadership, Teacher Leadership, and best practices within the field of educational leadership. Leadership matters! Enjoy!

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# **Frameworks for Innovative Preparation: Collaborative Programming for Teacher and Instructional Leaders**

Courtney C. Bentley and Amy J. Samuels  
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## **Abstract**

This paper posits innovative leadership preparation at one University that established collaborative, shared coursework between instructional and teacher leadership. This re/visions model focuses on cultural proficiency, distributed leadership, and examination of socially just practices fostering more democratic and inclusive practices. The authors examine how reframing leadership preparation adds legitimacy to leadership roles by better allocating resources to strengthen institutional culture and promote school improvement. Building capacity to develop collaborative, working relationships enhances organizational efficiency and better positions leaders to be agents for instructional excellence equipped with knowledge, skills, dispositions, and vision for socially just leadership within the school and community.

*Key words:* educational administration, instructional leadership, school improvement, social justice leadership, teacher leadership

Education is often criticized for abrupt top down shifts in policy and practice that lead to the dissolution of certain roles and the creation of others before determining their impact. These shifts may also lead to renaming, reframing, or even reallocating interpersonal resources at local levels. The ensuing endemic spread of “trendy” programs and new school roles and titles often become fodder for comic commentary, angst, and frustration across teachers’ lounges, faculty meetings, and lunchrooms. There are times, however, when the renaming and reframing of these roles reflects the work already being done, thereby adding legitimacy and support for these roles and better positioning school leaders as agents for change. The Alabama State Department of Education has embraced this by renaming and reframing the work of teachers, who assume leadership roles outside of their classrooms, by creating standards and an advanced graduate certificate (i.e., Class AA) for Teacher Leadership. Here, veteran teachers who are committed to curricular, instructional, and institutional improvement designed to promote and sustain overall school improvement, but who do not want to enter administration, are renamed and certified as teacher leaders once they complete an accredited Teacher Leader program. We situate this discussion through presentation of a framework for leadership preparation at one University that established collaborative, shared coursework between instructional and teacher leadership. The goal underscoring our work is to explore how leadership preparation can be executed to better allocate resources, strengthen culture, and promote school improvement.

In codifying and legitimizing teacher leadership, the Alabama State Department of Education provided a framework to guide faculty and local educational agencies as they developed advanced graduate programs at the Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) level (i.e., 30 hours beyond the masters) to prepare these school leaders. One University, however, had a unique challenge. In 2000, the University was granted permission to offer an Ed.S. in Teacher Leadership as an “innovative program,” leading to a Class AA teaching certificate. When the standards were opened for all institutions of higher education to seek program accreditation, faculty had to revise the existing program to meet state standards. Moreover, new standards for the Ed.S. Instructional Leadership program, formerly known as Educational Administration, had been issued. Given the charge of simultaneously revising both programs, faculty and local education agency officials decided to challenge the status quo by expanding areas where teacher leaders are not fully utilized in schools and systems by creating a collaborative, shared program between teacher and instructional leadership. The core of the work involved determining how *all* building-level school leaders can work together effectively for school improvement by centering equitable curricular and pedagogical improvements and socially just frameworks for teaching and leading.

## **Review of the Literature**

Although the construct of teacher leadership may seem trendy, it has a long tradition within the literature. For over 40 years, research in the area of school improvement identifies teacher leadership as a significant element for positive change (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006; Danielson, 2007; Levenson, 2014; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Although teacher leadership is cited as integral to school improvement, the construct itself is often varied and contested, remaining more conceptual than practical (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; Helterbran, 2010). While teacher leaders work to improve instruction, strengthen climate and culture, and demonstrate voice in relation to policies that impact schools (Levenson, 2014), the ensuing role ambiguity experienced by teacher leaders highlights an organizational inefficiency and misappropriation of a viable resource for fostering positive and sustainable change (Angelle &

DeHart, 2011; Helterbran, 2010; Hunzicker, 2012; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). This misappropriation diminishes the potential teacher leaders can bring as change agents since they are often limited to discrete curricular and instructional decision making rather than school climate and social justice issues that impact equitable access and opportunities. Furthermore, leadership opportunities and career growth for determined and motivated educators have been traditionally limited to administrative roles (Levenson, 2014); but teacher leadership strategically honors the role of teachers and values their work in improving instruction and making schools better. Nonetheless, teacher leaders cannot exist in isolation. Support from administration is critical in encouraging, developing, facilitating, and sustaining effective teacher leadership (Levenson, 2014).

### **Overview of Collaborative Programming**

The new program for educational administration in Alabama, at the Ed.S. level, was deliberately designed to encourage and develop a collaborative relationship between teacher and instructional leaders and generate opportunities for them to work together authentically and facilitate meaningful change. To develop this collaborative relationship, where professionals learn how to collectively build off each other's strengths, instructional and teacher leaders take four core courses in concert with one another to frame the practical with the theoretical and to prepare and support collaborative, justice-oriented, school leaders. Specifically, teacher and instructional leadership candidates take the following courses together:

- EDL 606: Mentoring and Professional Development
- EDL 612: Strengthening Community Relations through Restorative Leadership
- EDL 645: Data Driven Models for Curriculum Development and Assessment
- EDL 648: Leadership for Educational Equity and Social Justice

These courses include content and theory designed to connect school leaders in areas critical for sustained school improvement, including: (a) teacher induction, mentoring, retention, and professional growth; (b) developing positive communicative practices across varied stakeholders to promote restorative leadership, (c) empirically-based curriculum development, implementation, and assessment; and (d) equity auditing and action planning for socially just practices, programs, and policies. Candidates are provided opportunities to work and learn together and create and facilitate innovative projects. In addition, they research to critically examine and explore practical strategies to positively influence student learning, teacher performance, and school climate and culture.

### **Mentoring and Professional Development**

As the field has shifted from educational administration to instructional leadership, so have the roles of local administrators with respect to supporting instructional practices and evaluating teachers' effectiveness. School leaders are now expected to be the instructional leaders of the school, where they play a fundamental role in building and sustaining a climate of instructional excellence. They are tasked with dedicating focused attention and being actively involved in promoting consistent quality teaching, student learning, and positive educational outcomes for all students.

Instructional and teacher leader candidates examine knowledge, models, and skills critical to effective mentoring and professional development. Emphasis is given to the impact of positive relationships on the local school environment and on school renewal. Collaboratively, teacher and instructional leadership candidates explore best practices for engaging effective mentoring and coaching (Boreen, Johnson, Niday, & Potts, 2009; Knight, 2018), as well as examine how reflection, growth mindsets, and justice-orientated frameworks can serve to enhance professional development (Kumashiro, 2015). Opportunities are provided for self-analysis to explore strengths and areas for growth in relation to supporting the development, effectiveness, and retention of both novice and veteran teachers. Since it is critical to learn to validate, share, and honor the perspectives and experiences of teachers (Ríos, 2018), this course also provides a space where “teacher voices” as agents for change are valued. Teacher leaders develop key dispositions to work as liaisons between instructional leaders and classroom teachers to determine what is best for students and teachers. Here, the “dark side” divide between administrators and teachers is bridged by collaboratively learning skills and techniques needed to lead effective and equitable teaching and learning through quality mentoring, coaching, and professional development. Placing an emphasis on situational leadership (Green, 2017), instructional and teacher leaders analyze best practices in instructional coaching and how to effectively provide feedback to accelerate teacher growth and positively influence student achievement.

### **Strengthening Community Relations through Restorative Leadership**

Along with developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to support effective teacher practice, school leaders must also build a strong foundation regarding relationships with stakeholders. This course provides students the opportunity to develop multidirectional communication with community stakeholders to develop a clear understanding of the interconnections of the school organization and its community. Emphasis is placed on building positive relationships, establishing effective partnerships, and executing clear communication between the school and community to empower and promote shared goals, assets, and knowledge to improve learning and engagement opportunities for students and families (Fiore, 2016; Houston, 2010). Although most school-wide communication is disseminated by principals (i.e., instructional leaders), they rely on teachers on the ground to identify some of the critical issues impacting students in the classrooms. Social media has further complicated stakeholders’ expectations for *seeing* meaningful happenings in classrooms.

Principals, now more than ever, must work with teacher leaders to craft the narrative to share and celebrate what is happening in classrooms. EDL 612 provides multiple opportunities, including constructing a media release and assessment of community resources, to connect teacher and instructional leaders as they seek to craft relevant and accurate narratives for stakeholders and constituents. Given the increased entry points for communication that social media and other online resources provide, it is not surprising instructional leaders need support as they seek to embrace multidirectional entry points for stakeholder engagement (Houston, 2010). It is essential they have a pulse on the classroom by working with teacher leaders to consider what can be interpreted as competing classroom narratives. This collaboration enables school leaders to collectively narrate the message they need to convey to both internal and external stakeholders. Working toward this collective promotes increased cohesion among the school faculty and provides leaders with a way to confidently tap into multidirectional entry points, thereby

amplifying their collective voice to be heard by stakeholders and constituents including pressure groups, community agencies, and the news media.

### **Data Driven Models for Curriculum Development and Assessment**

In addition to being able to support instruction and effectively communicate with stakeholders, school leaders must have a solid mastery of curriculum and assessment and how data can be used to purposefully guide instructional decisions. Since curriculum at the pre-service level is often presented as a collection of prescribed, static standards or learning outcomes (Oakes, Lipton, Anderson, & Stillman, 2013), at the advanced graduate level, curriculum should be examined from socio-historical and political frameworks to understand curriculum theory and development (Glatthorn, Boschee, Whitehead, & Boschee, 2016). As students explore the varied definitions of curriculum across theoretical perspectives, they see how its meaning is also fluid, moving from “traditional” to “experiential” to “multinational” (Ellis, 2004; McLaren, 2014). They also examine how curriculum change, or lack thereof, can serve to marginalize or perpetuate inequitable learning opportunities and outcomes (Glatthorn, Boschee, Whitehead, & Boschee, 2016).

In this shared course, students explore and examine the foundations, design, development, organization, and implementation of curriculum and initiatives in K-Plus settings and the use of assessment data to develop best practice models for curriculum decision making and instructional improvement. Connecting curriculum to socially just practices, students are asked to reflect upon the idea of what it means to say a school is doing well (Eisner, 2017). Furthermore, students are given opportunities to inquire about their professional contexts and practices by considering: (a) if there are rigorous learning expectations for traditionally underserved students, (b) whether the school’s vision speaks to the academic performance and college preparation of traditionally underserved students, and (c) how educators demonstrate confidence and expertise necessary to successfully address the challenges of traditionally underserved students (Villarreal & Scott, 2008).

The course emphasizes the voice school leaders can have to prepare instructional and teacher leaders for positive curricular and pedagogical changes in relation to quality and accountability. The course also challenges the prescribed understandings of curriculum and standards-based education, so teacher and instructional leaders better understand the ways teachers’ daily instructional choices drive curriculum and the potential for change in their schools. Teacher and instructional leaders are challenged to gather curriculum data from classroom teachers, in addition to assessment reporting and accountability measures, in order to audit and evaluate such practices. Then, using the inquiry to drive action, candidates are expected to recommend curricular changes based on the qualitative analysis of teachers in addition to more traditional data sets. This model, again, values the voice and role of teachers in schools. More importantly, it prepares school leaders to tap into this valuable resource and build teachers’ capacity to collaborate in curricular reform efforts.

## **Leadership for Educational Equity and Social Justice**

Collectively considering instructional practices, relationships with stakeholders, and curriculum and assessment, in order to strengthen organizational culture and promote authentic school improvement, school leaders must be conditioned to always consider implications of educational (in)equity and social (in)justice. Despite continued calls for cultural competencies, critical multicultural researchers grapple with why they are not infused throughout educator preparation programs or meaningfully assessed at the in-service level (Sleeter, 2012). The perpetuation of “color-blind” policies and practices, despite the inclusion of diversity standards, limits the ways schools address inequitable practices, policies, and programs that serve to marginalize specific groups and contribute to continued gaps in access and outcomes. If teachers do not understand how oppressive ideologies manifest themselves in policy and practice, they are more likely to perpetuate inequitable practices and less prepared to confront dominant narratives (Ríos, 2018). As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, while a predominantly White teaching population remains static, such colorblind discourses form a societal curriculum that perpetuates biases and stereotypes from as early as Pre-K (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). Shifting demographics and stagnant policies necessitate a need for an equity framework for teacher and instructional leaders seeking to enact continuous school improvement and the development of equitable opportunities to learn (Theoharis, 2009; Terrell, Terrell, Lindsey, & Lindsey, 2018).

A foundational objective of both the Instructional Leadership and Teacher Leadership programs is to prepare practicing teachers and administrators to exercise leadership for continuous school-wide improvement for educational equity and social justice. Thus, while it is certainly intended that students will advance their own pedagogical practices, the programs’ shared objectives are larger in that they intend to graduate practitioners with the requisite knowledge, skills, dispositions, and vision to enact socially just leadership within the school and community. In this sense, graduates of both programs become teacher and instructional leaders who are integral contributors to reflective practices and active, sustainable educational improvement. Specifically, capacities for leading systemic curricular improvement in diverse educational settings is emphasized by analyzing interrelationships of identity differences within policy contexts and practices with attention to Alabama schools’ equity data. Equitable access to institutional structures of support, including technology, is also examined.

Embracing an anti-bias framework, EDL 648 facilitates meaningful opportunities for students to unpack and reflect upon social justice standards in relation to identity, diversity, justice, and action (Teaching Tolerance, 2016). The course begins with an analysis of “self”. The “personal journey of cultural competence begins within” and “culturally proficient leadership is distinguished from other leadership approaches in that it is anchored in the belief that leaders must clearly understand their own assumption, beliefs, and values about people and cultures different from themselves in order to be effective in cross-cultural settings” (Terrell, Terrell, Lindsey, & Lindsey, 2018, p. 9). The analysis of self is explored in tandem with subjective social constructs, including race, ethnicity, class, language, gender, sexuality, ability, and national origin (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Teacher and instructional leadership students are expected to complete positionality statements in which they delve deeply into their own perceptions and identities to understand their assumptions about their students’ identities and capacities to learn. Through this intensive activity, students are asked to stretch their thinking by reflecting on the ways that owning and negotiating their own subjective stance extends beyond differentiating instruction. They move

forward to complete equity audits (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009) of their schools and equity action plans aimed at strategically addressing an identified area of inequity. As such, the anticipated outcome is an increase in equitable opportunities to learn through more socially just practices, policies, and programs.

### **Discussion: Leader Preparation as a Framework for Change**

Creation of a collaborative, shared program between teacher and instructional leadership provides the opportunity to reframe perspectives on how to add legitimacy to leadership roles by considering how to best allocate resources to strengthen institutional culture and foster school change. While leadership programs are traditionally designed to prepare educators to lead, manage, and evaluate school improvement, this program is innovative in that it is intentionally aimed to encourage teacher and instructional leadership candidates to build relationships, collaborate, embrace new perspectives, and initiate sustainable school reform for educational equity and social justice. Although knowledge of content and theory are essential to leadership development, just as important are practical opportunities for candidates to examine how to apply concepts to real-world settings to influence real-world change. The collaborative design of the program prepares teacher and instructional leaders to generate substantive change by establishing practical partnerships with one another to enhance school reform. In addition, the program design provides opportunities for candidates to demonstrate inquiry, commitment, and excellence through their words and actions while always framing their thoughts on making people, schools, and communities better. By inspiring others, strengthening outcomes, holding each other accountable, and advocating for equitable access and opportunity, teacher and instructional leaders working collectively not only fulfill the duties of their roles, but promote school improvement. Moreover, they serve as cooperative change agents for positive learning environments, student achievement, and teacher development.

The collaborative programming is deliberately structured to build capacity and strengthen habits of mind, so teacher and instructional leadership students are more likely to sustain collaborative efforts in their schools and systems. Since the courses are centered around a framework that advocates for interconnectedness and partnership, strategies learned can be employed in practical settings which better positions school leaders to challenge dominant narratives and influence change. Given the perpetuation of achievement gaps, as well as inequitable access and opportunities in schools across the country, it is evident current policies, practices, and ways of doing cannot remain unquestioned and uninterrupted. It is imperative leaders are properly prepared to advocate for equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for all students, as well as structure mentoring and professional development to accelerate teacher growth and promote instructional excellence. Equipping leadership candidates with knowledge and tools to increase their awareness about existing inequities makes them more willing to see value in questioning their beliefs, actions, and dispositions. As such, the programming is designed to centralize unlearning, so students are better positioned to see value in questioning assumptions, as well as current guidelines, systems, and procedures, and develop a curiosity and passion for change. When students question what is, they are empowered to envision what can be. Generating a vision where leadership is not limited to instructional leaders (educational administrators) in the building, but rather distributed and joined in concert with teacher leaders, emboldens schools and systems to fully invest their resources to authentically encourage improvement and advance equity and excellence.

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# **Evolving Project Based Learning Methodology at the Higher Education Level: A Need for More Guidance and Accountability**

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## **Abstract**

Project based learning instructional strategies have been used in the K-12 and college setting to activate learning and engagement. Problem Based Learning allows students to learn by taking on real world problems. Research and literature shows that Project Based Learning can increase collaboration, problem-solving skills, communication, self-direction, creativity, time-management, and work-ethic (Wurdinger & Qureshi, 2015). Moreover, literature reveals that 21st century teaching strategies such as flipped learning can enhance Project Based Learning Strategies (Sams & Bergman, 2013). Recent research and professional discussion reveal that more guidelines and accountability lead to better outcomes when using Project Based Learning (Cooper et al., 2017; Ferren & Anderson, 2016; & Klyoster et al., 2018). This meta-analysis explores the most recent scholarly research in Project Based Learning and addresses the need for guidance and accountability.

*Key Words:* Flipped Classroom, Project Based Learning, Problem Based Learning, Instructional Technology, Accountability

Bell (2010) defines project-based learning as an advanced approach to education that teaches an abundance of ideas critical for success in the twenty-first century where students drive their learning through study, as well as working together to research and create projects that reflect their knowledge. The idea of learning by doing is a critical component of project-based learning. This idea was studied and developed by John Dewey's "theory of inquiry" in the late 1800's. During the last twenty years, insurmountable research has developed demonstrating the positive benefits of project-based learning in the classroom (Bell, 2010). More recently, within the last few years' research is showing that guidelines and accountability lead to better outcomes when using project-based learning (Cooper et al., 2017; Ferren & Anderson, 2016; & Klyoster et al., 2018). Effective project-based learning allows 21st-century learners to collaborate utilizing an open system across multiple disciplines.

There is a difference between how students are guided on student projects and project-based learning. According to Sam Houston State University (2018), project-based learning is inquiry-based, open-ended, ongoing, engaging, problem-solving, driving, and contextualizing versus traditional student projects which are teacher directed, highly structured, summative, thematic, fun, answer given, and de-contextualized. The university also asserts that project-based learning has elements of traditional student projects; however, there is a more formative assessment as part of the guidance, and project-based learning activities are centered around real-world problems.

Project-based learning has become a main staple in educational pedagogy across multiple disciplines at the higher education level. Due to the National Academy of Engineering calling for revitalization in how engineering students are instructed, researchers at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute found that incorporating project-based learning across multiple STEM disciplines included high student engagement amongst other benefits (Gadhamshetty et al., 2016). These students already had success in courses related to their STEM subjects leading to their admittance into their respective programs. Thus, students had a depth of pre-existing knowledge that their teachers could guide them on in their project-based learning pursuits.

Early project-based research models used a more open approach to project-based learning where students guided more of their education. However, more recent research demonstrates that professors are guiding pre-existing knowledge (Cooper et al., 2017; Ferren & Anderson, 2016; & Klyoster et al., 2018). David (2018) used project-based learning to build on the preexisting knowledge of junior and senior level biology students so that they would have a deeper understanding of theories and concepts associated with phylogenetics after they completed biology as a freshman and sophomore. Thus, he used two years of precise developed knowledge in biology as a foundation for developing his project-based learning activity to motivate his students to understand more advanced expertise in phylogenetics.

A project-based partnership between a university, a local business, and a local government improved the skills that new software engineers needed coming into the workforce (Cooper et al., 2017). Students were guided on specific tasks to solve a problem that is faced by local businesses and governments (Nagle & Pecore, 2018). These students gained unique software engineering skills that are much needed in their communities (Nagle & Pecore, 2018). Another example of a project-based partnership was designed around the redeveloping of a demolished shopping mall where students were guided by community stakeholders and their teachers on ways to improve the land (Nagle & Pecore, 2018). The instructors used prompts to direct students on solutions.

Project-based learning has even been used positively in the liberal arts curriculum (Ferren & Anderson, 2016). Collaboration between college students and community leaders also took place in this project. College students used learned knowledge from their liberal arts program to partner with a local community to promote health and wellness programs, business development to education and immigration policy reform. (Ferren & Anderson, 2016). Experts from the community, as well as their professors, guided their preexisting knowledge in these projects. These students gained a more in-depth understanding by exercising their skills in real-world projects.

Researchers in a bioinformatics training program found project-based learning very useful in helping students learn the complicated competencies (Emery & Morgan, 2017). The course organizers guided their students along the way by reviewing the projects in developmental stages. This guidance assisted the students in understanding what is expected of them in the project and to ensure that they are taking the appropriate steps throughout the process. Students were also assessed using formative assessment techniques in these steps and were provided feedback to aid them in perfecting their project. Students responded positively commenting that the project-based activity was their favorite part of the course (Emery & Morgan, 2017). Similarly, Suyanti, and Sinuraya (2018) indicated that project-based learning combined with guided practice significantly increased student achievement in chemistry compared to conventional teaching methods.

Project-based learning improved many variables amongst students in foreign language classes (Klyoster et al., 2018). This project expanded the participant's preexisting knowledge of cultural understanding and communication through their knowledge of electronic educational resources (Kloyster et al., 2018). These students used electronic educational resources to communicate across the globe. Instructors developed a unique project pertinent to their curriculum that promulgated their student's preexisting knowledge (Kloyster et al., 2018). Proficiencies in linguistics, regional, cultural, computer, plan, and management were improved through this project (Kloyster et al., 2018).

Effective project-based learning also assisted college students in developing the skills necessary to be successful in life. Wurdinger and Qureshi (2015) researched college students by using a paired sample T-test to determine if project-based learning developed life skills. A 35 question Likert scale survey was implemented before and at the end of a course (Wurdinger & Qureshi, 2015). They discovered there was a significant difference in survey one compared to survey two when it came to responsibility, problem-solving, self-direction, communication, and creativity. Moreover, on average life skills improved in all areas (Wurdinger & Qureshi, 2015).

Another quantitative study by Kumari and Nandal (2016) was implemented to find if project-based learning in a professional education MBA program developed professional skills compared to traditional teaching methodologies (Kumari & Nandal, 2016). Their study found that project-based learning enhanced professional skills in the students at the .01 significant level (Kumari & Nandal, 2016). Furthermore, they recommended that other institutes and professional bodies use project-based learning (Kumari & Nandal, 2016).

A pre- and post-intervention survey found that project-based learning significantly improved higher-order cognitive skills, self-efficacy, teamwork, and communication skills in a transportation engineering program (Fini et al., 2018). Instructors devised an instrument to measure the gains that were unique to their curriculum. These types of skills were beneficial to college students as they entered life after graduation (Fini et al., 2018). College students were able to think for themselves, work together in teams, communicate more effectively, and have more confidence in what they were capable of from project-based learning (Fini et al., 2018). College

students not only developed life skill, but they also gained a strong sense of public service from project-based learning (Fini et al., 2018).

Hunter and Botchwey (2017) enacted a problem based and project-based learning activity where college students and elementary students collaborated to work on an interdependent civic engagement project. Both groups were formally assessed along the way to provide better guidance (Hunter & Botchwey, 2017). Twenty-first-century techniques were used for both groups resulting in a higher order learning of public service (Hunter & Botchwey, 2017).

Belagra and Draoui (2018) researched to discover if project-based learning made it possible for their students to be more motivated to take on the education of complicated content. The control group was a class of students who did not use project-based learning (Belagra & Draoui, 2018). The experimental group was a similar class of students who did use project-based learning (Belagra & Draoui, 2018). Results from the study found that the combination of the tutorial with the project-based learning was likely to raise students' motivation to learn and to master the subject (Belagra & Draoui, 2018).

Mekaria and Widjajanti (2018) researched math students which involved an attitudinal component. There were two randomly selected sample classes (Mekaria & Widjajanti, 2018). The first class used project-based learning (Mekaria & Widjajanti, 2018). The second class was treated with quantum learning (Mekaria & Widjajanti, 2018). The aim was to determine if both learning methods affected reasoning ability, achievement, and attitude towards mathematics using quasi-experimental research (Mekaria & Widjajanti, 2018). Findings indicated that both project-based learning and quantum learning was effectively viewed from student's reasoning ability, performance, and attitude toward mathematics (Mekaria & Widjajanti, 2018).

Seman, Hausmann, and Bezerra (2018) analyzed statistics on the perception of electrical engineering students' understanding of content in a project-based activity in conjunction with traditional teaching methods. They used partial least squares path modeling to discover how the learning process connected to the project-based learning activity (Seman et al., 2018). Data from this research suggested that student perception was grounded in the humanist ideal of the formed ego and cooperation among student (Seman et al., 2018). Moreover, Lutsenko (2018) found that students' perception of project-based learning influenced their professional characteristics such as teamwork, autonomous learning, communication and problem-solving abilities in an engineering program. Furthermore, Hanney and Savin-Baden (2013) stated that combining problem-based learning and project-based learning signaled a shift from a pedagogy based on epistemological inquiry towards one of ontological inquiry where students engaged with their own identity as learners in a world of unknowns.

Sams and Bergmann (2013) suggested that flipped learning enhanced instruction by maximizing instructional time and creating a more student-centered learning environment instead of the traditional teacher-centered. One example was using clickers to poll understanding of a lesson and then allow students to view a teacher made educational video. After this, students were guided toward project-based learning and problem-based learning to make this learning more exciting and to promote inquiry-based learning. Moreover, they demonstrated how the combination of project-based learning and flipped learning were used to enhance differentiated instruction (Sams & Bergmann, 2013). Moreover, a comparison study between a group of students who used project-based learning and flipped learning in character design and animation was conducted using a pre and post-test (Autapao & Minwong, 2017). Researchers found that flipped learning and project-based learning provided students the freedom to determine based on their aptitude (Autapao & Minwong, 2017).

Chis, Moldovan, Murphy, Pathak, and Muntean (2018) investigated the effectiveness of project-based learning and flipped classroom teaching method in a computer programming module. They used a case study to analyze the efficacy in the steps: traditional teaching flipped classroom and the combination of conventional classroom and project-based learning (Chis et al., 2018). Education and edutainment were examined in the three phases (Chis et al., 2018). Edutainment was analyzed through a questionnaire (Chis et al., 2018). Edutainment is entertainment-based technology that is educational (Chis et al., 2018). Researchers found that project-based learning and the flipped classroom was effective especially for lower level learners and the edutainment surveys found that the combined approach does advanced in the edutainment of more mature students (Chis et al., 2018).

### **Technology and Accountability**

Various technology platforms can be used to support inquiry-based, open-ended, ongoing, engaging, problem-solving, driving, and contextualizing components of problem-based learning (Sam Houston, 2018). Bell (2010) stated that technology as a method, not an end, allows students to experiment with various technologies for all facets of project-based learning. A genuine use of technology is highly appealing to students because it makes use of their fluency with computers (Bell, 2010).

Ting-Ting, Yueh-Min, Chen-Ying, Lei, and Chen (2018) used e-book system to combine project-based learning and authentic learning into a community health nursing practice course. After a three-week study, they found the variety of functions, multimedia feature, and ease of the e-book system not only expanded learning appeal and motivation but also enhanced learning effectiveness (Ting-Ting et al., 2018). Also, Omar (2018) found that using project-based learning for better understanding microcontrollers allowed his students to improve performance and allowed them to connect more to their community. Moreover, he used this approach to enhance mathematical modeling, stability analysis, control design, and the application of the PID controller (Omar, 2018). Moreover, Novak and Wisdom (2018) researched preservice elementary teachers in a 3D printing science project. They wanted to know how 3D printing project-based learning affected science teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, nervousness, interest, and confidence (Novak & Wisdom, 2018). They discovered that 3D science printing project significantly lowered participants' nervousness and increased their self-efficacy, interest, and confidence (Novak & Wisdom, 2018).

Mallison (2018) along with her students created four podcasts built on unorthodox research about language differences and a short film that spotlighted linguistic diversity on campus. She was successful in combining project-based learning and podcasts as well as other technology to engage students at a university where many graduates will go on to be community activists in local low-income diverse communities (Mallison, 2018). Furthermore, students learned firsthand the procedures of sociolinguistic data collection, from research design and ethical discretions to choosing suitable methods and communicating results to broader audiences that are appealing (Mallison, 2018).

Research conducted by Hursen (2018) found that project-based learning applications assisted by Edmodo software created a positive impact on the inquiry skills and the academic achievement of prospective teachers. He used pre and post-test as well as a control and experimental group in his research (Hursen, 2018). Edmodo software platform allowed the

teachers in the experimental group to further their inquiry skills and increase academic achievement which are vital components of project-based learning (Hursen, 2018).

Splicah, Oshima, and Oshima (2018) focused on developing a computer-mediated learning environment that could be studied through the regulation of students' internal scripts. Forty-eight students participated in their before and after project-based learning study (Splicah et al., 2018). Researchers found that a significant number of students who experienced unknown situations during collaboration developed new regulation scripts (Splicah et al., 2018). Case studies pointed out that students raised their script for socially shared regulation when understanding socio-cognitive challenges and they worked with others to regulate and self-regulate socio-emotional difficulties (Splicah et al., 2018).

Kim and Lim (2018) developed a framework for the design and implementation of socially shared metacognitive regulations supports in project-based learning. First, they designed the structure to better guide students on socially shared metacognitive control (Kim & Lim, 2018). Second, they implemented the framework as collaboration script (Kim & Lim, 2018). Then, an empirical study validated by observing the effect of the collaborative script on thirty-two students' interactions in real settings (Kim & Lim, 2018). Shared metacognitive regulation after use of the collaboration scripts greatly affected participants' interactions concerning team planning and knowledge construction. Thus, the framework was validated (Kim & Lim, 2018).

Al Mughrabi and Jaeger (2018) developed a project-based learning capability maturity model that was used for system-wide evaluation and improvement of the ability of the institution to enhance the education of students through project-based learning. Maturity models were recognized across various organizations to improve organizational competitiveness continually (Al Mughrabi & Jaeger, 2018). They examined a literature review and two case studies to provide validity (Al Mughrabi & Jaeger, 2018). The case studies showed the effectiveness of the project-based learning capability maturity model identifying areas for improvement (Al Mughrabi & Jaeger, 2018). Furthermore, recommendations were made for this type of model to optimizing project-based learning (Al Mughrabi & Jaeger, 2018).

Lin (2018) developed the KIPSEE instrument which stands for knowledge integration, project skills, and self-efficacy scales. Item analysis and confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the reliability and validity of the KIPSEE instrument (Lin, 2018). Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was correlated for the entire instrument and found that there is a significant correlation between the KIPSEE instrument results and the student's product evaluation scores (Lin, 2018). A reliable and valid instrument was created to create more accountability for students in online courses.

Harmer and Stokes (2016) found that most students mainly favored prescription concerning research question and group membership for a project-based learning activity in geography, earth and environmental sciences course for undergraduates. They used semi-structured interviews and audio-recordings to gather data for analysis (Harmer & Stokes, 2016). This information led them to conclude further that proper guidance plays a vital role in the democratization of project-based learning (Harmer & Stokes, 2016). Creating suitable guides will increase accountability in the developmental process for project-based learning.

Rees Lewis, Easterday, Harburg, Gerber, and Riesbeck (2018) developed a system to overcome the barriers for incorporating professional experts in project-based learning. Their system included prompts for team planning, goal setting, monitoring progress, and displaying information to their professional experts online (Rees Lewis et al., 2018). They discovered that this system assisted participating in overcoming barriers when working with their professional experts

due to regulations (Rees Lewis et al., 2018). Moreover, the experts were better able to support students by having an automatic emailed report (Rees Lewis et al., 2018).

Shared regulation of learning SSRL and self-regulated learning are phrases that are associated with how groups members work and collaborate (Lin, 2018). The researcher used computer-supported collaborative learning CSCL environment with proper guidance to enhance the SSRL level with the group and individual SRL because of both effect collaboration during project-based learning (Lin, 2018). A better guided computer-supported learning environment led to more group awareness and group members understanding of their peer's contributions toward the group. The experimental group experienced a moderately reduced free-rider effect and more SSRL and SRL levels as compared to the control group (Lin, 2018).

Berry, Levine, Kirkman, Blake, and Drake (2016) developed an assessment instrument known as SkillSET which stands for Skill for Science/Engineering Ethics Test to increase motivation and accountability. They found that by using project-based and problem-based learning, that students developed a deeper understanding of the skills (Berry et al., 2016). Furthermore, based on their findings they suggested that more project-based and problem-based learning should be experimented so that students can gain a deeper understanding of complicated concepts (Berry et al., 2016).

Smith and Gibson (2016) discussed that professor assumes a significant role in project-based learning. They recognize the high value in project-based, problem-based, and flipped learning, but also understand the conceptual, theoretical limitations in these types of learning (Smith & Gibson, 2016). The professor must assume a more elevated role of responsibility in ensuring that trained properly through project-based learning (Smith & Gibson, 2016). So, the professor must devise and institute a level of accountability (Smith & Gibson, 2016).

Spikol, Ruffaldi, Dabisias, and Cukurova (2018) developed multimodal learning analytics that better guided them on understanding which features of student group work are good predictors of team success in an open-ended task with physical computing. They looked at traditional and deep learning techniques when analyzing participants from multiple modes of learning and observed interactions (Spikol et al., 2018). Their results indicated state of the art computational techniques allowed them to gain insights into the unknowns of learning in students' project-based learning. For example, the distance between students' hands and faces was an indicator of their type of interaction during the learning process (Spikol et al., 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Developing effective project-based learning technique is vital toward the successful implementation of this learning approach. As project-based learning has evolved with new technological advanced so has our understanding of guiding and motivating students. We are now able to use technology to engage students more effectively. Moreover, technology can be used to develop better tools for guidance, assessment, and accountability. Project-based has been found to be effective across multiple disciplines from around the world. As the world progresses, so must our project-based learning activities which take on real-world problems. Project-based learning is even more effective when combined with other twenty-first-century learning approaches such as problem-based learning and flipped classrooms. Research in the area of effective project-based implementation needs to be continued and expanded to a broader audience.



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# **Leading Rural Schools: Looking to the Literature for Evidence to Inform Principal Preparation Programs**

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## **Abstract**

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to identify challenges faced by rural school principals, strategies to address the challenges, and how the challenges and strategies can be addressed through the implementation of the 2018 National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards and the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs). The review yielded 42 studies conducted between 2006 and 2018. Major themes emerging from the literature include issues related to leadership, enrollment, teacher recruitment and retention, and school improvement/student achievement. Major challenges and strategies are aligned with the NELP standards and PSELs for use by those teaching principal preparation courses or developing curriculum for principal preparation courses.

*Keywords:* rural, principal, leadership

The purpose of this paper is to identify: (1) challenges to school leadership encountered by rural school principals, (2) strategies to address these challenges, and (3) how the knowledge of these challenges and strategies can inform principal preparation programs and better prepare future principals. Themes are identified through a systematic review of peer-reviewed published studies from the years 2006-2018. These themes are aligned with the 2018 National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards and the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSELs) adopted by the Alabama State Department of Education to show how rural education leadership issues can be embedded throughout the curriculum in principal preparation programs.

### **Perspectives**

Perhaps no population in the United States can more readily identify with the dreams and possibilities offered by public education than the children attending our nation's rural schools. For many of these children, the only possibility for an education is through the local public school – often a single school located miles from a neighboring town or city. According to the 2013-2014 NCES Report, slightly more than half of the schools in the United States are categorized as rural with large concentrations in Texas, North Carolina, Georgia, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Alabama, Indiana, and Michigan. Many of the schools have small enrollments of less than 500 students. In Texas, for example, 459 districts meet the Texas Education Agency (2015-2016) definition of rural which includes enrollments of less than 300 students. In Alabama, approximately 599 of the 1,315 schools attended by 39.7% of the state's students are classified as rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). As shown in the 2017 report on *The Condition of Education*, approximately 36% of rural school children are attending schools with mid-low levels of poverty with 25.1% to 50% of the children eligible for free or reduced lunch, 34% are attending schools with mid-high levels of poverty with 50.1% to 75% eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 14% are attending schools identified as high poverty schools with more than 75% eligible for free or reduced lunch (McFarland, et al., 2018, p. 135).

Principals in rural schools encounter many of the same challenges and opportunities as their non-rural counterparts; however, research suggests that for rural school principals, the challenges are intensified due to location, size, and limited community resources (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Parson, Hunter, & Kallio, 2016). Rural school principals may also face negative cultural and stereotypical characterizations often promoted in the media (Surface, & Theobald, 2014). Female principals may face even greater challenges due to gender discrimination (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). Although fewer in numbers, Pendola & Fuller (2018) found that females hired to lead rural schools in Texas tended to stay longer than their male counterparts. Overall, the challenges associated with rural schools often lead to higher turnover rates and shorter school-level leadership stability (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). As professors of educational leadership in one of the ten states with the highest enrollment of rural students, we recognize the need to apply what is known about the challenges rural school principals are likely to face and effective strategies to overcome them in the preparation of future school leaders.

## Methods

The research method for this study follows Hallinger's (2013) framework for conducting systematic reviews of research in educational leadership and management. Based on a rigorous review of educational leadership and management research reviews conducted over a period of five decades, Hallinger proposed a high-quality framework with the potential to reduce "the gap between research and practice" (Hallinger, 2013, p. 126). We followed a series of structured steps closely aligned with Hallinger's framework.

### Steps Followed and Data Sources

The steps followed in the method of inquiry along with the data sources used are described below.

1. Based on our stated purposes, three questions were developed to guide our review:
  - What unique challenges do rural school principals face?
  - What strategies address the challenges faced by rural school principals?
  - How can principal preparation programs address the needs of rural school principals?
2. The selection of studies for inclusion is guided by the realization that rural school principals face challenges and opportunities that may differ from those faced by principals of non-rural schools and that those designing principal preparation programs should be aware of these differences and seek ways to address them throughout leadership preparation programs.
3. We initiated our research utilizing the online search system Scout. Using the "advanced research tool" our search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2006 - 2018 selected because they include the period leading up to the 2008 revision of PSELs and through the development of the 2018 NELP standards currently being adopted by leadership preparation programs across the nation. Combinations of terms including "rural", "school", "leadership", "principal", "administration", "education", "challenges", "problems", "obstacles", "school", and "opportunities" were used in the searches. The SmartText feature was used to find similar results once articles were selected. In addition, we utilized the Google search engine and we searched specific rural education journals including the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *The Rural Educator*, and *Peabody Journal of Education* special issues devoted to rural education. Due to the variations on how rural is defined and characterized in different countries, our review was limited to those studies that include rural education in the United States of America. Dissertations, whitepapers, policy briefs, essays, grant, and project reports were not included in the review.
4. Studies were reviewed for design and rigor and entered into a table where date, author, study type, study content, and results (including challenges and strategies) were systematically mapped for each.
5. Both qualitative and quantitative studies were included; however, an effort was made to limit studies to those focusing on school level leadership rather than the superintendency.
6. The data mapped in Step 4 were synthesized into themes and associated with corresponding NELP standards and PSELs (See Table 1).

## Results

The systematic review yielded 42 studies including 18 qualitative studies (primarily semi-structured interviews); one ethnography; three literature reviews; 11 mixed-method studies using combinations of survey, interview, observation, and document reviews; and nine quantitative studies. The major challenges identified from our review along with evidence from research indicating strategies school principals utilize to overcome them are included in this section. A selection of studies from the summary table representing the major findings are detailed in this section:

- Rural school principals often play multiple roles, superintendent/principal for example, (Canales, Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Horst & Martin, 2007) and may lead multi-level schools (Parson et al., 2016). With little administrative support, some principals focus their professional development on cultivating their ability to make decisions without the input of a leadership team (Parson et al., 2016). This strategy gave school principals the chance to view their supervisory roles and responsibilities in light of their school's distinctive dynamics. Others shared leadership (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009) and allowed their followers to take initiative and make decisions (Canales et al., 2008). One system designed and provided its own professional development for new assistant principals to socialize them into the rural context (Enomoto, 2012). Miller et al., (2016) reported some promising growth in principal's sense of efficacy, school climate perceptions, and leadership behaviors in a group of rural school principals participating in McREL International's Balanced Leadership Professional Development Program.
- Management is often the primary focus of the position leaving little time to focus on instruction (Browne-Ferrigno, & Allen, 2006; Parson et al., 2016). However, Beesley and Clark (2015) reported rural principals felt they had more influence over curriculum in their school than nonrural principals and less influence on the school budget. Targeted professional development is one strategy for changing the focus of work from manager to instructional leader (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Rural principals can benefit from professional development focused on building team commitment (Parson et al., 2016) with less emphasis on management (Salazar, 2007).
- Rural school principals often face geographic isolation (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Parson et al., 2016; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013) and the school may be located miles from the nearest town (Horst & Martin, 2007). Successful school principals built collaborative relationships with the school and community (Preston & Barnes, 2017), utilized place-based education (Howley, Howley, Camper, & Perko, 2011), used cultural norms to form relationships with community stakeholders, and shaped a communal attitude among the students (Klar & Brewer, 2013). A tripartite approach beginning with specific training for rural school leaders followed by induction of new rural school leaders that includes mentoring and ongoing professional development is being utilized by one university to support rural school leaders (Hildreth, Rogers, & Crouse, 2018).
- Rural school principals face declining populations and low enrollments (Howley,

- Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Parson et al., 2016). Community economics may force graduates to leave rural communities for employment (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014) contributing to the cycle of population decline. Student transfers to cyber charter schools affects enrollment and shifts funding away from rural public schools (Mann, Kotok, Frankenberg, Fuller, & Schafft, 2016). Budge (2006) encouraged rural school principals to nurture a "critical sense of place" in students (p. 9). Linking student learning with actions to preserve the rural community's environment through place-based stewardship education showed potential for increasing student commitment to the community (Gallay, Marckini-Polk, Schroeder & Flanagan, 2016). Low student enrollment may change community demographics resulting in an increase in minority populations and tension over cultural norms within the community spilling into the school (Howley et al., 2009). Principals can utilize regional service centers to provide professional development on multiculturalism (Howley et al., 2009).
- Low enrollment creates challenges for school principals in their efforts to provide a wide-range of course offerings (Howley et al., 2009). Distance learning and dual enrollment offerings were two initiatives implemented to increase students' access to courses. School funding is often tied to enrollment and rural principals may see a greater percentage of the budget allocated to non-instructional expenditures such as transportation (Lindahl, 2011). To prevent consolidation due to low enrollments, principals implemented collaborative strategies including shared services, shared administrators, traveling teachers, and distance learning (Howley et al., 2012). School principals should promote the positive aspects of smaller schools. For example, in a large-scale Texas study, students in high poverty small schools (primarily rural) had greater success on state assessments than their larger school counterparts, possibly due to the sense of "family" and community they offered (Lee, 2009).
  - Attracting and retaining high quality teachers is a major concern (Beesley, Atwill, Blair, & Barley, 2010; Howley et al., 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Monk, 2007) especially in math and science and for the most disadvantaged populations (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). Persistently low performing rural schools may have even more difficulty attracting and retaining teachers (Rosenberg, Christianson, & Angus, 2015). Azano & Stewart (2016) assert that efforts should start in teacher education programs by preparing teachers for work in rural schools through cultural responsiveness to place and by providing experiences in rural settings. Other recruitment strategies include: alternative licensure, grow-your-own programs, relocation assistance, and financial incentives (Beesley et al., 2010; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015).
  - Masumoto & Brown-Welty (2009) emphasize the importance of hiring the right people, placing them in the right classrooms, and providing frequent feedback and observations. Building the capacity of the current faculty (Barrett, Cowen, Toma, & Troske, 2015) through targeted and intensive teacher training is another retention strategy. Haar (2007) recommends low cost retention strategies such as being aware of teachers' needs, promoting a culture of trust and support, providing growth opportunities, and empowering experienced teachers through listening and the sharing of expertise. In Alaska, retention rates have improved over a period of six



years after the implementation of a state mentor project (Adams & Woods, 2015). Biddle & Azano (2016) identify a need for adequate training for all contexts (rural and urban) and a need to understand similarities and differences in urban and rural schools along with the diverse needs of each, in the context of place.

- School improvement efforts in rural schools may be hampered by misalignment between principal and teacher perceptions, failure to focus on the positive aspects of the school, and feelings by principals that they are alone (Sanchez, Usinger, Thornton, & Sparkman, 2017). Willis and Templeton (2017) cite teacher buy in, creating mutual trust, and limitations on time for collaboration as issues to overcome when establishing and sustaining PLCs in rural schools. Empowering teachers to do their jobs and arranging time during the day for collaborations are techniques used to overcome the problems encountered (Willis & Templeton, 2017). Rural school principals may find it particularly difficult to implement change necessary to turn around a low-performing school. Mette (2014) provides evidence that communication and support from turnaround specialists, strong district support of the initiatives, and highly interpersonal leaders able to change the school culture by using shared leadership and accountability can lead to successful turnaround in rural settings.

The evidence provided in these studies indicates that principal preparation programs structured around the newly adopted NELP standards and PSELs cannot approach leadership training with a one-size-fits-all approach. The challenges faced by rural school principals along with strategies for overcoming them should be supported by the curriculum. For example, preparing a leader for multiple roles requires a high level of competency in relation to NELP Standard 6: Operations and Management along with a strong focus on Standard 4: Learning and Instruction and Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms. The isolation of rural schools provides a unique opportunity for the development of an appreciation of place, a connection to the environment, and the creation of a school culture that reflects community norms (Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness). Rural school principals, in spite of the struggles they encounter, are challenged with helping their students achieve their dreams by creating possibilities for success through school improvement (Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement). See Table 1 for the complete summary of challenges and strategies aligned with the NELP standards and PSELs. The standards crosswalk can be found in the National Policy Board for Educational Administration NELP Building-Level Standards (2018).

In summary, from the literature we synthesize the challenges faced by rural school principals and identify strategies used to address them. These findings should be considered in conjunction with the NELP standards and PSELs in programs preparing aspiring school principals.

### **Limitations**

This study represents a review of literature from 2006-2018. The researchers acknowledge that there may be research prior to 2006 that would inform the study and that there may be recently published literature that may not have been discovered. Search terms and parameters utilized for searches may limit the findings and other search terms and combinations of terms might yield different results. Including international studies, dissertations, and other published documents and reports would further expand the study.

Determining the alignment of results from the literature with the NELP Standards and PSELS was based on key terms and concepts surfacing from the literature that were also identifiable in the standards; however, the backgrounds and teaching experiences of the researchers also informed the alignment. Rural was not clearly defined in some studies and given that there are many definitions for rural, this was a limiting factor. Finally, the researchers recognize that the challenges identified in the study may not be unique to rural school leaders; however, how the challenges are manifested and the resources available for dealing with them are unique to rural school leaders.

### **Significance**

With the increased emphasis for principal preparation programs to align curriculum and coursework to national standards for the purpose of meeting accreditation requirements, it would be easy to overlook the importance of studying leadership in the rural context. This study uses a structured literature review process to gather the findings from previous studies to identify challenges faced by rural school principals along with potential strategies for overcoming them. It is the first to relate the specific needs of rural school principals to national educational leadership standards and should prove useful for those designing principal preparation programs based upon the NELP standards and the PSELS. Since university preparation programs may not have specific courses devoted to rural school leadership, this study proposes an option for embedding rural school issues throughout the curriculum, mitigating the need for a specialized course if one is not possible.

It can be argued that principals in schools that are not rural face many of the same challenges as their rural counterparts and use some of the same strategies to overcome them. Does this diminish the need to focus specifically on the rural school principalship? Based on the challenges revealed in the literature, the researchers would say no. Instead, it is recommended that similar reviews be conducted examining the challenges principals face in other settings, urban or suburban perhaps. Common themes could be identified, and divergent themes noted. These discoveries could prompt rich discussion and dialogue in university courses. It is further recommended that in-depth interviews and observations of rural school principals be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of rural school leadership. Visits to rural school could shed light on contextual factors such as school size and distance from urban or suburban centers. An effort could be made to include only those studies where rural is clearly defined or the rural context is clearly described.

Each of the themes identified warrant more in-depth study. For example, studies about the impact on the community when schools close due to low enrollment would provide insight into the critical role rural schools play in sustaining the community. Studying the efforts school leaders make to prevent or delay consolidation of schools would shed light on the unique role of the principal in schools with dwindling populations. Expanding the study to include challenges faced by rural school superintendents could further add to the knowledge base, particularly since principals and superintendents are likely to work closely together in rural schools, especially those that are small. The literature suggests that rural school leaders face many challenges attributed to school location. The literature also reveals strategies that can be utilized to mitigate the challenges. The researchers suggest that these can be addressed through leadership preparation courses aligned with the NELP standards and the PSELS.

Table 1

*Challenges and Strategies with Literature Sources Aligned with NELP Standards and PSELs*

Theme: Leadership		Sources
NELP: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3		
PSELs: 2 (a-f); 3(b, h, g); 4 (e); 8 (a-e, h-j); 9 (b-d, f-h)		
Challenges	Isolation; geographic location; management demands leaving limited time for instruction; limited influence on the budget; serving dual roles such as superintendent/principal; expected to be an instructional expert in all subject areas; heavy workload; pressure to be visible and involved in the community; difficult to balance professional and personal life in small communities; stress placed on the family; loss of self-efficacy for principals moving from teacher to leader; relations with superintendent/school board; lack of professional support	Beesley & Clark, 2015; Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Canales, Delgado, & Slate, 2008; Hansen, 2018; Horst & Martin, 2007; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Parson, 2016; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013; Versland, 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013
Strategies	Professional development focused on teaching and learning, culture change, and leadership skills; focused training on school-level responsibilities (Balanced Leadership Program); system designed in-servicing for assistant principals; freedom for others to take initiative, make decisions, and take action; time management training, stress management workshops; university partnership to support specialized preparation, induction, and professional development; self-evaluation and self-awareness programs, developing a support network; strong mentors; using technology for mentoring; using shared leadership; building collaborative relationships with parents, school, and community; using place based education; building relationships based on cultural norms of the community; practicing context-responsive leadership; placing emphasis on positive school culture and climate	Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Budge, 2006; Canales et al., 2008; Enomoto, 2012; Goddard et al., 2016; Hildreth et al., 2018; Howley et al., 2011; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Masumoto, Brown-Welty, 2009; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Salazar, 2007; Versland, 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Wood et al., 2013
Theme: Enrollment		Sources
NELP: 3.1, 3.2, 3.3; 4.1, 4.2; 5.2; 6.2		
PSELs: 3 (a-e, g, h); 4 (c-e); 5 (a-f); 7 (b), 8 (b-e, j); 9 (c, d,)		
Challenges	Facing consolidation; diminishing resources; graduates leave to find jobs and do not return; competition from cyber schools; tension over cultural norms due to changing demographics; limited	Howley et al., 2009; Howley et al., 2012; Lindahl, 2011; Mann et al., 2016; Parson, 2016;

	availability of course offerings; decreased funding for instruction; competing for students	Petrin et al., 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018
Strategies	Nurture a critical sense of place; provide multiculturalism training; utilize distance learning and dual enrollment; seek opportunities for shared services i.e. shared administrators and traveling teachers; promote positive aspects of smaller, rural schools; increase efficiency; help students create positive connections to school and community so they will want to return	Budge, 2006; Gallay et al., 2016; Howley et al., 2011; Howley et al., 2012; Lee, 2009; Petrin et al., 2004; Rhodes, & Beall, 2009; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018
Theme: Teacher Recruitment and Retention NELP: 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4 PSELs: 3(h); 4(e); 6 (a-g); 7 (a-g)		Sources
Challenges	Recruiting teachers; staffing high quality teachers; small applicant pool; large percentage of disadvantaged populations; difficult to attract and maintain math and science teachers; hard to attract outsiders; hard to attract and retain teachers in schools with a history of low performance	Barret et al., 2015; Beesley et al., 2010; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Howley et al., 2009; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Monk, 2007; Rosenberg et al., 2015; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018
Strategies	Start by being more culturally responsive to place in teacher education programs and by providing more rural school experiences; conduct studies to determine rural equity gaps and develop equity plans; offer longevity bonuses and fees waivers for certification; develop grow your own programs, develop communities of practice and capacity building; provide intensive teacher training in math and science; offer frequent feedback and observations; practice deliberate hiring and placement of teachers; implement shared leadership; implement low cost strategies i.e. promote a culture of trust and support, provide opportunities for growth, and empower experienced teachers; provide mentoring for early-career teachers; involve teachers in the community; offer higher pay or incentives; promote positive aspects of the school and community i.e. relationships with students, safe environment, small class size; recruit teachers with rural backgrounds; listen to teacher suggestions for items such as competitive insurance packages, competitive salaries, flexible	Adams & Woods, 2015; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Barrett, et., 2015; Beesley, et al., 2010; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Haar, 2007; Musumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Ulferts, 2015

scheduling and flexible personal days, and state funded salary bonuses

Theme: School Improvement/Student Achievement		Sources
NELP: 1.1, 1.2, 4.3, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 7.2		
PSELs: 1(a-g); 3(b, g, h); 4(a, b, f, g); 6(a, b); 8 (a-e, h, i, j); 9(a-b, d, g, h, j); 10 (a, b)		
Challenges	Misalignment between principal and teacher perceptions, failure to focus on the positive aspects of the school; principal isolation; persistent low achievement, deficit attitudes, shifting demographics; student and parent apathy; resistance to change; high poverty, limited fiscal resources, funding cuts, accountability demands; difficulties in establishing initiatives like PLCs due to lack of teacher buy in, lack of; mutual trust, limited time for collaboration	Budge, 2006; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Maxwell & Huggins, 2010; Preston et al., 2013; Sanchez et al., 2017; Willis & Templeton, 2017
Strategies	Improve school perception, provide targeted professional development, make necessary changes (staff and logistical), implement professional learning communities; set direction/vision, developing people, redesign the organization, manage the instructional program, provide recognition for students and staff, manage instruction by aligning resources and goals, establish trust with parents; communication and support from turnaround specialists, strong district support of the initiatives, and highly interpersonal leaders able to change the school culture by using shared leadership and accountability; demonstrate integrity and courage, focus and vision, expectations and data evaluation, resources and empowerment, role modeling, and collaboration	Horst & Martin, 2007; Klar & Brewer, 2014; Maxwell & Huggins, 2010; Mette, 2014; Willis & Templeton, 2017

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# **Leadership and Followership: The Yin & Yang to Building Professional Capacity**

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## **Abstract**

Structured organizational groups are composed of two primary groups, leaders and followers. Of the two groups, the success or failure of organizations, such as schools, are dependent on the leader and his or her leadership abilities. Effective leadership and followership in the educational setting is essential to improving and sustaining academic success. With the ever-increasing pressures in education from national, state, and district accountability standards, school organizations should also focus on fostering relationships between the leaders and followers. Leadership and followership roles are similar to the Chinese principles Yin and Yang, representing duality, yet harmonious relationships. Organizations should keep in mind that future leaders will come from the pool of individuals currently serving as followers; however, it is equally important to recognize leadership and followership as an undeniable symbiotic relationship between those who lead and those who choose to follow.

*Keywords:* Leadership, followership, relationships, capacity, yin-yang

The success or failure of an organization, whether it is business or educational in nature, is dependent upon the actions of two groups of individuals, leaders and followers. Setting and maintaining the trajectory outlined of focus is guided by the leader as well as his or her leadership abilities. However, in education, exhibiting and executing successful leadership abilities is more important than ever with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), flexibility and innovative requirements to ensure school accountability practices and equitable opportunities for all students. Accountability measures and high stakes testing require a capable leader in the piloting seats at both school and district levels. In addition to excellent leadership, schools must have great followers to carry out their missions and visions of success. Followers at their finest participate with independence, aptitude, and eagerness in the daily quest of their organizational goals. Currie (2014) emphasized that some of the finest follows will ensure their own personal and professional goals are aligned with those set forth by the organization and make it a priority to accomplish them.

In many circumstances, the leader and follower relationship has been viewed as two separate entities. However, they are two resilient, yet connected, active roles that are required and exist on every organizational level. Leadership and followership have been described as the being two of the same coin (Rogers & Bligh, 2014; Wishon, 2015). Researchers have referenced the roles of leadership and followership to a two-sided coin due to the symbiotic relationship each role possesses. If we were to physically examine a coin, one side would represent leadership, while the flip side would represent followership. Each side of the coin, when abilities are abundant, will produce outcomes that are advantageous to the organization. Leadership is exceptionally important to a school or organization performance, on the other hand, followership must have a role in the performance as well. Inquisitively, followership receives only a small portion of the spotlight that leadership does. The role of followers, in an organization, is significant at all levels. Followers may consist of stakeholders, executives, employees, or individuals who are in support of or trust the cause. It was the work of Kelley (1992) that prompted significant dialogue and research about followership. Kelley (1992) emphasized the need to pay attention to followers and that followership is worthy of its own distinct research. According to Kelley (1992), conversations about leadership should include followership because leaders neither exist nor act in a vacuum without followers. Specifically, leaders have followership ability and followers have leadership ability (Northouse, 2019). Everyone, whether in the leader or the follower role will depend on each other, which requires some giving and taking in the relationship. Leaders cannot exist without individuals following, and individuals cannot follow without a leader for guidance.

### **Leadership and Followership Relationship**

Leadership is often associated with images of individuals with vast influence over followers working towards completion of a specific cause or goal. On the other hand, the role of the follower has a derogatory connotation and usually receives less praise. Without followers, there would be no leaders (Wishon, 2015). In organizations, followers represent the majority. Followers contribute approximately 80% to an organization's success, while leaders contribute approximately 20% (Kelley, 1992).

Examining the leadership and followership relationship, it is also important that the definitions for both roles are defined. Cox, Plagens, and Sylla (2010) defined leadership and followership as the following:

*Leadership as the capacity to exercise influence over the actions of others such as others behave in the manner the leader desires. Followership represents the conscious and unconscious behaviors of individuals in support of the goals of a leader that has been expressed via words or conduct. (p. 38)*

For many, followers have considered themselves undervalued and considered describing oneself as a follower, utilizing the term itself invokes unfavorable images Blair and Bligh (2018). This stereotype has caused people to avoid being categorized as followers, in some instances referencing followers as those who lack the ability to lead (Hoption, Christie, & Barling, 2012). Chaleff (2009) believed that the term follower is not identical to the term subordinate. Chaleff (2009) described a follower as one who shares a goal with the leader, has faith in what the organization is trying to achieve, and wants both the leader and the organization to be successful. Lapierre and Carsten (2014) suggests additional research on the hierarchy of roles as well as who is and is not considered a follower in organizational roles to differentiate between followers and subordinates. Followership is an integral component of the leadership role because not everyone can serve as a leader. American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan stated, “you are going to have to serve somebody.” Additionally, the late famous American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein has been quoted as saying, “the most difficult instrument to play in an orchestra is the second fiddle.” As a result, no matter what followers may be called or how their roles are described, followers are just as essential to the leadership equation as leaders; followers just serve a different purpose (Wishon, 2015).

Research in organizational management have identified followers as being key players in assisting and supporting successful organizations through the utilization of their strengths as well as complementing and enhancing their leader’s leadership (Currie, 2014). Kelley (1992) posits followership and leadership are two separate but complementary roles. They are not competitive and the greatest successes in an organization require that people in both roles perform maximally. Additionally, Hurwitz and Koonce (2017) stated “leadership and followership are complementary, and equally necessary for individual and group environmental fitness” (p. 42). Followership is present in the collective leadership process. It is essential that the follower understands the value of the leader and knows how to assist the leader in providing service to the overall goals of the organization. Nonetheless, the follower can be an active participant in the leadership process, contributing to the common good or purpose of the organization.

### **The Yin-Yang of Leadership and Followership**

The leadership and followership relationship have been described as complementary, symbiotic in nature, as well as referred to as two sides of a coin. The descriptions used in referencing the leadership and followership relationship are similar in nature to the characteristics found in the Taoism philosophy, specifically the principles of Yin-Yang. The Taoism philosophy accentuates a holistic study of the universe as well as mankind, which includes a macro and micro approach and a dialectic inquiry of all subjects covered (Bai & Morris, 2014). Yin-Yang principles were created as dual cosmic energies with opposite yet complementary values and principles. In addition to complementary values, Yin and Yang consists of two forces; passive and active. Each force is composed of an opposite force that allows growth, then ceases, which allows its complement to grow (Bai & Morris, 2014). Bai and Morris (2014) expressed, “yin and yang forces depend on each other for existence-neither of them can exist without the other” (p.175). The

dependent forces Yin and Yang share are cyclic in nature highlighting their coexistence in the universe, each alternating at a high and low dimension exemplifying duality, change, unity, harmony, and diversity (Lee & Reade, 2018). All who adhere to the principles of Yin and Yang, according to Taoism believers, in addition to the five key elements have been guided successfully in areas such as politics, arts, and military practices (Bai & Morris, 2014).

The principles of Yin and Yang outlined five fundamental energies that regulate the functioning of the universe. The five energies paired with spiritual virtues are: 1) wood (benevolence), 2) fire (propriety), 3) metal (justice), 4) water (wisdom) and 5) earth (faithfulness). Each of the virtues were considered guiding principles in selecting suitable Leaders in the Chinese society; furthermore, leaders were required to exhibit the five virtues in an amicable way (Bai & Roberts, 2011). Although the Taoism philosophy is grounded in helping others understand nature and mankind, it is also built on the premise that “phenomena are composed of two interdependent, yet competing forces” (Bai & Morris, 2014, p. 176).

Similarly, to leadership and followership, the Yin and Yang principles are opposing yet balanced dynamics interconnected, allowing one force to be more salient at times. Yin-Yang leadership behaviors are developed around creating meaningful relationships with others. Additionally, creating a balance between leadership actions and the needs of others could increase commitment from personnel (Lee & Reade, 2018). In the case of examining the Tao principles of Yin-Yang and cross-cultural leadership, there has been a considerable amount of discussion on leadership when compared to followership. It is important to note that there is growing awareness in the leadership literature about the follower’s role and characteristics are critical, but under-investigated, in the leadership process (Kelley, 2008). Bai and Roberts (2011) declared, “from a Taoist perspective, leaders and followers are interchangeable, not just because leaders are followers of their superiors and followers might be leaders of their subordinates, but also their positions are changeable over the time” (p. 730).

### **Leadership-Followership and Building Capacity**

Leadership, a topic of study for a variety of fields, over the years has seen a shift in the roles and how it is defined. Traditionally, leadership was viewed as authoritarian in nature, characterized by giving orders to followers. Next, leadership was viewed as a counterpart role by acting as a facilitator involving reciprocal relationships between leaders and followers characterized by integrative activities. And now leadership can be seen as a group based role, leaders working more side by side with followers. When leaders began taking on a group led approach, the human component of the leadership and followership relationship became an important factor toward increasing an organization’s success.

Malakyan (2014) noted the continuous surge of focus on developing more leaders than followers, when “nearly 80% of individuals working in organizations are followers” (p.6).

It is essential to understand, that both roles work together in order to advance the organizations performance. Additionally, Baker (2007) explained leadership will materialize as a result of being flexible yet adaptable, fostering trust from their followers, and willingness to work through unavoidable changes, which establishes a partnership relationship instead of hierarchical relationships.

In most educational settings, the relationships observed between principals, assistant principals, teachers, and staff are organized in a conventional hierarchical structure. Through this structure, it is represented that building administrator (principals) are the only leaders in the school,

which should not be taking into account the demands from state and national level accountability components. In a study of constantly high performing schools, Lambert (2005) noticed the schools studied had great leadership capacity, in which she characterized as being, “broad-based and skillful participation in the work of leadership” (p. 63). Even more, she noted that “schools were building leadership capacity, principals and the teacher leaders were becoming more alike than different, each taking on more responsibility for the schools effectiveness, framing problems, and seeking solutions” (Greenlee, 2007, p. 48).

Building capacity in educational organization will require a closer look at the roles and relationships between leaders (principals) and followers (assistant principals, teachers, etc.). Leaders are still considered vital positions in the top of the hierarchy structure; most importantly, leaders can create a more productive relationships between the followers in their school who depend on them for guidance as well as creating opportunities for increasing capacity. Likewise, leadership programs are charged with developing future leaders and teacher leaders with the training on how to build capacity within schools.

Bennett, Ylimaki, Dugan, and Brunderman (2014) determined leaders (principals) are in control of uncovering the talent and potential found within teachers and other future leaders under their leadership. Each leader will display their own leadership abilities and styles, and there is no right or wrong approach to leading a successful school, but there is a collective set of actions carried out by competent leaders. Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) categorized effective leadership practices into four categories:

1. Setting directions: focus is developing vision, goals, communication of the direction;
2. Developing people: relates to increasing the knowledge and skills of faculty;
3. Redesigning the organization: focuses on establishing positive relationships and supporting collaboration
4. Managing the instructional program relates to teaching and learning, such as staffing, providing instructional support, and aligning resources.

In a study conducted on sustaining school improvement through capacity building, Clark (2017) realized building capacity is a collective, yet interconnected process that is created by: establishing direction with input from teachers; nurturing a learner-centered community; providing professional development relative to staff needs; fostering reflection and cultivating collaboration and shared responsibility. Even though the results for building capacity was inclusive, it was noted there was a focus on collaboration, working together, and alternating between leader and follower roles for constant growth. As a result of the study, additional findings by Clark (2017) revealed principals’ (leaders) own experiences aided in building capacity of their staff (followers) by: situating themselves as a learner; maintaining a focus on goals; establishing trust and honored relationship; and reflecting on input.

## **Conclusion**

Successful school principals exhibit leadership skills such as being the instructional leader of their building, putting others before themselves, accepting responsibility for the outcomes of their school, and most important, being a visionary. In addition to leaders, schools must have great followers to carry out the missions and visions in the quest of being successful. Followers at their finest participate with independence, aptitude, and eagerness in the daily pursuit of their

organizational goals. Effective and competent followers are just as important to the organization's success as the leaders. The relationship between leaders and followers are also found in the Taoism principles of yin and yang. Both represent symbiotic relationships where each exhibit duality providing each role a chance to develop and maximize their potential with the help of the each other. The roles found within the leader and follower relationship, as well as with Yin and Yang principles, create a level of balance, trust, and commitment which all are important in creating positive culture, employee development, and organizational success. Even though educational leaders are responsible for making final decisions, maintaining a balance of the leader and follower relationship, could increase building capacity by allowing assistant principals, teachers, and staff members the chance to be involved in the decision making processes, providing staff members choices, and displaying acts of inclusivity and collaboration.

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# **Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Social and Emotional Learning and its Effects on School Climate, Student Behavior, and Academic Achievement**

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## **Abstract**

The researchers interviewed six participants from three schools identified as The Leader in Me Lighthouse Schools. Using a qualitative design, the researchers examined teachers' perceptions regarding the effects of social and emotional learning on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools across central Alabama. The interview responses provided insight into the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of social and emotional learning. The findings indicated that teachers perceived a notable difference in a positive school culture, positive student self-regulation, and student led academic achievement after implementing TLIM. The teachers stated the greatest barrier was the cost of the program. The implications for practice and theory could involve employing and examining other social and emotional learning skills curriculums in school settings to improve school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement.

*Keywords:* social and emotional learning, The Leader in Me, school climate, student behavior, academic achievement

Conversations among 21<sup>st</sup> century educators across the nation focus on strategies to incorporate personal growth skills into the academic core curriculum because of the socio-cultural diversity of their students (Care, Kim, & Vista, 2018). Educational leaders are reviewing and integrating SEL initiatives into their instructional programs that focus on developing character, learning social and emotional skills, building relationships, and improving school culture (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). Researchers recognize that as schools implement core curriculum and life skills, students' academic growth increases leading to successful life experiences (Haymovitz, Houseal-Allport, Scott, & Svistova, 2017). Zins and Elias (2006) contend that educational instruction which integrates life skills with academics optimizes students' potential for positive academic achievement and success in their future employment. Grant et al. (2017) state student success depends on learning a range of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills along with achievement in core academic areas.

In 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required states to measure academic performance on standardized tests and to measure non-academic skills (Klein, 2017). Therefore, educators must consider social and emotional instruction as a core component to the educational process rather than a supplementary activity (Haymovitz et al., 2017). To accomplish this mission, effective educational leaders must possess knowledge about best practices in education, model best practices and procedures for teachers, and implement programs that focus on personal and academic student growth (Ash & Hodge, 2016). By modeling appropriate social behaviors and providing ample classroom opportunities for students to practice these behaviors (Farmer, Farmer, & Brooks, 2010), teachers create classroom environments which increase positive relationships with the students and their peers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Even though educators agree that social and emotional learning (SEL) instruction is vital to creating sustainable outcomes among students, instruction that supports SEL is often absent in school curriculum (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Greenberg, 2010). Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, and Salvoy (2012) propose that ineffective implementation results in the failure of school growth. With the help of social and emotional learning, students can master the nonacademic goals as well as achieve higher academic grades as required by ESSA (Grant et al., 2017)

### **Components of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2017) defined SEL learning as a K-12 school framework based on best practices for developing social and emotional learning interwoven with academic achievement. Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2007) contend that SEL competencies develop the ability for individuals to perceive and oversee feelings, overcome and tackle complicated issues, and build positive relationships with others personally and professionally. This type of explicit instruction guides students to become active learners by collaborating with their peers (CASEL, 2012). During this explicit instruction, students learn by practicing diverse scenarios in a variety of ways to familiarize themselves with this type of learning, programming it as part of their everyday nature (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). According to CASEL (2017), SEL contains five competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness. The continued implementation of these competencies develops platforms to help improve overall sustainable student achievement (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013).

CASEL (2017) explains that self-awareness enables individuals to identify their own emotions, thoughts, and values accurately. In this competency, students learn to control their

personal behavior. By learning to develop self-awareness at a young age, students develop the ability to recognize their individual strengths and weaknesses, which enhance their self-confidence and self-efficacy. Durlak et al. (2015) concluded that students who demonstrate mastery of self-awareness can show the connection between thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Self-management assists in successfully self-regulating one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in various situations (CASEL, 2017). In effect, how one manages stress, controls impulsive behavior, and motivates oneself are all forms of self-management. This competency also includes setting goals and working to achieve-academic and personal goals. Durlak et al. (2015) suggest that when individuals display self-management, they can control their self-gratification and impulses to remain focused on accomplishing their desired goals.

Responsible decision-making requires individuals to make constructive choices about their own personal behavior as well as social interactions with others as it relates to personal ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms (CASEL, 2017). Students mastering this competency can realistically evaluate the consequences of their own personal actions as well as demonstrate mindfulness in considering the health and well-being of others (Durlak et al., 2015).

Relationship skills portray how well students establish-and maintain-healthy, rewarding relationships within a group of people despite their diversity (CASEL, 2017). Good communication skills include not only the way students communicate with others but also include how they listen to one another. Relationship skills also include the ability to cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict in a constructive manner, and seek and offer help appropriately when needed. Learning how to act in public is a vital social norm for students to learn in this competency (Durlak et al., 2015).

The last component, social awareness, focuses on the ability to empathize with others by not only understanding but also by displaying social and ethical norms for behavior (CASEL, 2017). This competency also involves learning to view the perspectives and opinions of others who have a different viewpoint or value system in terms of cultural and ethnic belief systems (Durlak et al., 2015). Schools will be more successful in helping students achieve academic goals when social and emotional learning is implemented (Elias et al., 1997)

### ***The Leader in Me (TLIM)***

*The Leader in Me* (Covey, 2008) is a comprehensive school-wide initiative that develops a positive school culture by using a common language to develop student leadership, to improve academic achievement, and to decrease negative student behavior. *TLIM* schools report a decline in student discipline referrals and an increase in student, teacher, and parent satisfaction and engagement after implementing age-appropriate social and emotional learning skills (Hatch, 2012).

The program, based on Covey's (2013) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, assists educators in implementing strategies designed to improve school performance and student success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The *TLIM* program focuses on 7 *Habits* which are (Habit 1) Be Proactive; (Habit 2) Begin with the End in Mind; (Habit 3) Put First Things First; (Habit 4) Think Win-Win; (Habit 5) Seek First to Understand, then to be Understood; (Habit 6) Synergize; and (Habit 7) Sharpen the Saw. The *TLIM* program contains strategies for educators to implement the 7 *Habits* into the core mission and vision of the school as well as SEL strategies to empower students to reach their full potential in positive behavior, academic achievement, and personal life skills (FranklinCovey, 2014). Social and emotional learning skills are woven within the Covey's Seven

Habits (See Appendix A). Patterson (2016) suggests when educators implement social-emotional learning interventions in their classrooms the effects have an impact on long-term outcomes. Patterson also states that *TLIM* is an effective social-emotional program which contains research statistics supporting its role in developing positive social and emotional learning, even in preschool students.

### **The Teacher's Role in Social and Emotional Instruction**

As research of SEL instruction evolved, the program attained the level of best practices in educational and mental health circles (Adams, 2013). Many schools began integrating SEL programs into their school curriculum and found the programs helped reduce student behavior issues and positively affected the everyday school climate (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017). In effective SEL programs, teachers provide ample opportunities for students to interact with their peers, and if the need arises, teachers reteach and remodel appropriate behaviors to reinforce the skills (Farmer et al., 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Other proponents in educational circles recommend that teachers spend time each day on *soft skill* instruction that includes behavioral and emotional life issues and strategies to overcome them (Education Week, 2016; Potts & Potts, 2016).

Jones and Bouffard (2012) stress that the attitudes of the teachers are the driving force behind the maintenance of SEL programs. The teacher's mindset shapes the mindset of his or her students (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lutke, & Baumert, 2008). Students can sense their teachers' perceptions of the classroom environment (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997). Teachers not only influence their students by what they teach but also by how they model the curriculum and manage the classroom environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). When teachers are motivated in the SEL program and willing to participate in professional development, the propensity of sustainability in the effectiveness of the SEL program increases (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Likewise, the degree of implementation of SEL programs outside the classroom influence the program effectiveness and sustainability (CASEL, 2012). The commitment of teachers to implement these strategies at lunch, recess, carpool, assemblies, and other school activities outside the classroom requires motivation on the part of each teacher in the school (CASEL, 2012; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, states may select how to implement SEL in their schools and may use that data collected in implementation for research purposes. School climate and student engagement are the most widely used indicators by school systems that do not implement SEL in their accountability reports (Wallace, 2018; Batel, 2017). Currently, only eight states require the implementation of SEL instructional standards in grades K-12 in public school curriculum (Wallace, 2018; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000). Most states include SEL in kindergarten or in afterschool programs (Wallace, 2018). Afterschool programs can provide an excellent venue for implementing SEL because of the flexibility in creating their own programs (Jones et al., 2017). Wallace (2018) also states that children attending these programs on a regular basis benefit from best-practices such as topics on self-perception, positive social behaviors, and increasing achievement, which could lead to increased college and career readiness.

Local, state, and national media continue to release reports detailing the schools that failed to adequately prepare its youth for success in school and in the workplace (Gurney-Read, 2015). They also report varied accounts of school systems that used inappropriate procedures for testing as well as districts that only use methods to teach students how to pass state tests (American

Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014). According to Humphrey, Curran, Morris, Farrell, & Woods (2007), these reactions to policy may cause educators to reevaluate their educational structure. Opponents to SEL programs argue that the school's responsibility is to academically educate students. In response, proponents of SEL instruction state that *to educate* includes improving social skills as well as academic skills (Coryn, Spybrook, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009; Humphrey et al., 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine teachers' perceptions of the effects of SEL on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools across central Alabama.

### **Research Questions**

The researchers developed research questions to help them understand the perceptions of teachers on how social and emotional learning improved school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement.

1. Which practices of SEL instruction are effective in improving school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools in *The Leader in Me* program?
  2. Which practices of SEL instruction are least effective in improving school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools in *The Leader in Me* program?
  3. What are the complications, challenges, and potential barriers for teachers to incorporate SEL instruction into the curriculum?
  4. Excluding the support received from *The Leader in Me* program, identify external factors, resources, or partnerships that helped influence school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools.
  5. What changes, if any, have teachers experienced during their own teaching practice that have influenced their teaching as a result of teaching SEL instruction in their classrooms?
- The researchers utilized a qualitative design in addressing the research questions framing the study. The researchers employed a grounded theory design to analyze the qualitative findings and to develop a theory that emerged from the researchers' interviews with the teachers.

### **Participants**

Participants of the study included teachers from three elementary schools in central Alabama awarded *Lighthouse School* status. The schools had 50% or greater free and reduced lunch. Teachers included in the study were staff members in the school before and after implementation of the social and emotional learning program.

## **Instrument**

The primary instruments in this study included the two researchers. To ensure no bias interfered with the study, the researchers deliberately had no prior relationship with any of the participants. The review of literature and qualitative questioning techniques served as core resources to develop the interview questions. The researchers collaborated with other university professional educators in formulating the interview questions. The interview included one session and nine open-ended items.

The researchers included several factors when formulating the interview questions. Since the research focused on social and emotional learning, the researchers included all five SEL components outlined by CASEL in the interview protocol: self-acceptance, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness. The researchers also formulated the interview items around the research questions and the three areas of concentration from research: school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

The researchers obtained permission from the superintendents and principals of the participating schools. Researchers used purposeful sampling in selecting teachers for the research. The principals in each of the three schools assisted the researchers by selecting effective elementary teachers who taught at their schools before and during the implementation of *TLIM* Program and after the recognition of the *Lighthouse School* status. The researchers interviewed six participants (two teachers from each elementary school selected). Qualitative interview is one of the most common ways to gather data for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2012). Researchers recorded each interview session using personal password-protected smartphones to record the interviews. Each interview required approximately 90 minutes to administer over a period of three weeks, spending one day at each school. Then the audio recordings were uploaded to an internet service, Rev.com, for transcription.

## **Data Analysis**

Researchers analyzed the qualitative data by examining the transcribed interview notes. The researchers conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis by reading the transcribed interview notes and writing memos with short ideas and concepts about the data. Four overarching themes emerged from the interview coding process related to teachers' perceptions of the effects of social and emotional learning on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement: a) positive school climate, b) student self-regulation, c) student driven achievement, and d) barriers of the program. Within the four themes, the researchers addressed the five competencies of social and emotional learning outlined by CASEL (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness) and their relationships within the four themes.

## **Findings**

Qualitative findings from interviews with six teachers from *Lighthouse Schools* identified the following themes: (1) positive school culture, (2) self-regulation, (3) student driven achievement, and (4) barriers of the program. The most common practices that improved areas of

focus included: (1) changing the focus to a student led school was the most effective practice to improve school climate; (2) making the students aware of their behavior and how it affected others was the most effective practice to improve student behavior, and (3) helping the students realize they are responsible for their learning was the most effective practice to improve academic achievement. The least effective practices to help improve the focus areas included: (1) school climate was least affected by a teacher led environment (2) student behavior was least affected by old discipline methods such as write ups and in-school detention, and (3) academic achievement was least affected by teacher led instruction. The research showed the most common barrier faced by the schools was the cost. Teachers noted that the greatest influence on their teaching practice was moving from a student focused learning environment to a student led learning environment.

Findings supported research of Humphries, Cobia, and Ennis (2015) who stated positive, proactive interventions are effective in building relationships and trustworthiness in the school culture and reducing student discipline write-ups within the school. Circumstances outside the control of schools such as poverty, crime, and prior knowledge of incoming students influence the safety and culture of schools; therefore, whole school intervention programming is necessary to increase trust and collaboration within the community schools. Additionally, whole school intervention discipline programs with high teacher involvement are successful in reducing student discipline and increasing positive school climates. *TLIM* program is a whole school initiative whose focal points are on developing character, setting goals, solving problems and learning to lead. This study and other studies on *TLIM* and other social and emotional learning programs represent examination of creative positive school cultures, reducing student discipline, and increasing student academic achievement.

## **Discussion of Results**

The study involved a nine-item interview divided into three categories addressing the effects of the social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in their elementary schools. The findings from the data indicated that participants perceived that the social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program did support improvements in the categories.

### **School Climate**

The interviewees reported that the social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program did show positive results in the school climate. The interview participants in this study stressed the importance of changing the school culture to one more conducive to learning and placing the responsibility for the learning on the students. Participants in the study perceived that as students became more aware of others, assumed ownership for their schools' climate, and adopted the new culture as second nature, learning naturally followed.

### **Student Behavior**

Interview participants noted that *TLIM* program helped the students take more responsibility for their actions and taught them to understand how students can control their reactions to different situations. Interviewees noted specific practices: developing cool down zones for students, setting up goal notebooks, and teaching self-regulation methods with teaching

the self-regulation methods as the most important. The social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program teaches the students' expected behaviors, the expectation of incorporating learning ideals into their everyday thinking, and using what they learned to make the changes. Participants in the study felt that *TLIM* program made a significant positive difference in the self-regulation of the students, which led to a better school climate and academic achievement.

### **Academic Achievement**

The participants in the study reported that academic achievement improved after the implementation of *TLIM* program. However, one participant reported the academic improvement was not as significant as the school had hoped. The participants in this study mentioned that having the students take responsibility and ownership in their own learning led to greater understanding on the students' part as to the importance of self-motivation to learn and achieve.

### **Conclusions**

The importance of social and emotional learning continues as a topic of discussion in current research. As school leaders look for effective ways to improve school culture, student behavior, and academic achievement, social and emotional learning programs may effectively foster these changes in all types of schools. As school leaders, teachers, and stakeholders understand social and emotional learning and the positive effects on school environments, new ways to initiate change can surface for implementation. These processes not only improve students' lives while in school but also their eventual outcome as productive members of society. SEL can affect students in environments outside of the school and bring about more positive changes to the communities in which these schools reside. By teaching students ways in which to manage themselves in varying situations, schools which implement the social and emotional learning programs can make a lifetime change that benefits students, schools, and communities across the state.

The researchers designed this study to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding the effect of SEL on school climate, academic achievement, and behavior in schools in central Alabama. The researchers found that teachers perceived a significant difference in these areas after their schools participated in a social and emotional learning program. The researchers' findings indicate that students began to appreciate their roles as a force for change concerning the school climate, which led them to understand that they are active participants in the process of their learning and behavior for improvement in their school. The use of effective strategies to train teachers and students was important to set the groundwork for the strong skill set that was needed to implement the components of the program. The strategies included instructing teachers to support their students as leaders in the school, responsible decision makers, and active learners. While teachers perceived these strategies as effective, other factors led to barriers for the implementation and sustainability of the program. The greatest barrier was cost. This study contributed to school improvement research by providing additional data into the effectiveness of social and emotional learning for students in the state of Alabama.

This research showed that teachers perceived that social and emotional learning helps to improve three vital parts of students' education: 1.) school climate improves, 2.) student behavior improves, and 3.) student academic achievement improves. Improvement continues to occur after the initial implementation phase of the program.



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